

To be half in love with war

Nothing, and So Be It

By Oriana Fallaci.

Translated by
Isabel Quigly.

Doubleday. 320 pp. \$7.95

Reviewed by
SALLY QUINN

Oriana Fallaci has written a book about Vietnam that you'll read. She calls it a "diary" and says it

is only an attempt to document a single experience, it doesn't want to explain the bloodthirsty madness of the war in Vietnam. . . . I chose Vietnam because its tragedy has become a symbol and because this symbol had entered our daily lives: in those days, nothing could have shown me better than Vietnam that you don't need to be a Nazi to become a murderer, that people kill just as well in the name of democracy, freedom, Christianity, as they did in the name of the Third Reich.

Oriana Fallaci is an Italian journalist who has a reputation for getting and writing difficult, incisive interviews; for being direct, blunt, unembar-

Sally Quinn is a reporter for the Washington Post.

rassed. She went to Vietnam three times in a period of seven months. She kept having to go back, the first time because of boredom with everything else, the second time because of an admitted fascination with the possibility of death. Her book is written like a suspense novel.

She plunges into the war immediately, going to an American outpost, Dak To, completely surrounded by the enemy. She relays her shock and horror so vividly it is nauseating. Immediately upon her return she has a touching interview with a Vietcong prisoner, Nguyen Van Sam, and another with General Cao Ky.

During this period her friend François Pelou, Saigon Bureau

Chief of Agence France Presse tells her, "There's magic fascination in war. So, although we hate it, we end up being attracted by it, seduced, completely enveloped in it."

At first she rebels but later admits to herself,

Suddenly I felt a suspicion, maybe a love, certainly a change, and my head whirled dizzily, and I knew that I was glad to be in Vietnam. It was the dizziness you feel when you face what is known as heroism.

And she set out to study it "in all its forms"—including the suicide of a Buddhist monk.

She interviews the Reverend Mother of a Buddhist nunnery in charge of 6,000 girls. It is she who must approve their requests to immolate themselves. She has had 150 requests, and explains that when she sees a burning she feels "immense admiration, respect, and a little envy."

And before you can even admit it to yourself, Fallaci says it: "I would like to see the burning of a monk or a nun." She doesn't, but she tells how François did, so clearly you can almost smell the smoke.

She interviews the cruel General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, Chief of the South Vietnamese police. He tells her, "I adore roses. In this vase I always have fresh ones, with a pearl of dew in each . . . I cannot live without beauty, without grace." Later, about to have his leg amputated, he asks her to visit him in the hospital. He weeps and what he tells her through his tears reveals him as a man who really does love beauty and truth.

Fallaci does not dwell on My-lai—she wasn't there—except to say, "Yes, war does something good: it reveals us to ourselves."

She writes clearly, simply, recognizing that there is no need for an elaborate or dramatic style. The subject is enough. She doesn't hesitate to use other people's stories and attribute them. Many times she will begin a chapter or

sentence with: "Here is what happens," "Here is what he said," "This is what I read."

The most moving parts of the book are two translated diaries of dead North Vietnamese soldiers. Most North Vietnamese soldiers keep little personal diaries and when they are killed the Americans (because Fallaci is Italian she doesn't identify with the Americans and the American reader can enjoy the book with less than the usual guilt) seize them, catalogue them, and translate them to collect information for counterpropaganda. They are worth buying the book to read.

Also not to be passed over lightly are the last few pages of the book, which deal with the student massacre in Mexico City in the summer of 1968,

in which she herself was badly wounded. It is devastatingly horrible.

Finally she describes beautifully a cocktail scene atop the Caravelle Hotel in Saigon where the women are exclaiming over each other's beautiful dresses, the delicious ice cream, and watching the city's outskirts being blown to bits by bombs and napalm dropped in rings.

"I think they look like candles round a birthday cake," says a woman, and Fallaci devises a final prayer:

Our father, who art in heaven, give us this day our daily massacre, deliver us from pity, from love, from trust in man, from the teaching your Son gave us. As it has been good for nothing, it is good for nothing. Nothing, and so be it. □



FALLACI